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16. EURASIAN EAGLE-OWL *BUBO BUBO TIBETANUS* BIANCHI
AT 2,100 M IN NORTH SIKKIM

On March 3, 1995 while on a visit to North Sikkim, we met an old hunter who had a big owl skin. On inquiry, he said that he had found the bird electrocuted by a high-tension wire at Khedum (c. 2,100 m) in Lachung Valley about two and a half months earlier, i.e. around mid-December, 1994. It had the following measurements:

Wing length	: 480 mm
Bill (From feathers)	: 232 mm
(From base of skull)	: 48 mm
Tarsus length	: 72 mm
Tail length	: 300 mm
Length of unstretched skin laid flat	: 68 mm

Its overall colour is pale buff and black, with dark heavy streaks on the breast and finely vermiculated streaks on the abdomen. The toes are completely feathered, with feathers overhanging and concealing the base of the dark, slaty claws. Local people from Gangtok identified it as 'Pwongma' (Lepcha) and 'Koiralo' (Nepali) and as the owl that "eats cats", the last possibly being the tawny fish-owl *Ketupa flavipes*. The hunter reported that its mate was still in the area, but so far we have neither seen nor heard of more of these birds.

Of the four subspecies of *Bubo bubo* (Linn.) in the Indian subcontinent, *Bubo bubo bengalensis* is the darkest and most richly coloured, both *B.b. turcomanus* and *B.b. hemachalana* are paler, while *B.b. tibetanus* is browner.

According to the HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN (1983) by Ali and Ripley, *B.b. bengalensis* is resident throughout the Subcontinent from c. 1,500 m (and rarely c. 2,400 m) in the western Himalayas up to west-central Nepal "...possibly further east, but not yet recorded from Sikkim, Bhutan or NEFA..."

Both *B.b. turcomanus* and *B.b. hemachalana* are recorded from the western Himalayas (Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh) and extraliminally from northern Pakistan, northern Baluchistan, and western Tibet right up to Kazakhstan.

According to Vaurie (1965: 587) *B.b. tibetanus* has "...Range within our limits hypothetical..." though it "...probably also inhabits the eastern Himalayas at high altitudes..." Thus, it may occur in northern Sikkim and perhaps also North Bhutan and NEFA..."

Considering the length, measurements, colour and locality, the specimen appears to be the Eurasian eagle-owl *Bubo bubo tibetanus*

Bianchi, which has an extralimital distribution in central and eastern Tibet (Lhasa, Gyantse, Khamba Dzong), areas that adjoin Sikkim. Sálím Ali does not mention this owl in *BIRDS OF SIKKIM* (1962). This specimen, now deposited in the BNHS collection, confirms the hypothetical occurrence of the species in our range from North Sikkim. It may be worthwhile to emphasize that *Bubo bubo bengalensis*, which is much smaller

and darker, is also not yet recorded from Sikkim.

I thank the Sikkim Forest Department for enabling me to obtain this record.

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17. ON THE STATUS OF *HYPOCOLIUS AMPELINUS* BONAPARTE IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

The hypocolius *Hypocolius ampelinus* Bonaparte (Family Bombycillidae) occurs in Afghanistan, S. Iran, Arabia and N. Africa where, in some areas, it is common and widespread. The *HANDBOOK OF THE BIRDS OF INDIA AND PAKISTAN* (Ali and Ripley 1972) describes the species as a rare vagrant, with individual examples seen and collected at long intervals in the Indian subcontinent. This opinion was supported by the fact that perhaps the first specimen was collected by Blanford on March 6, 1875 in the Larkana district, Pakistan followed by a record of Duke on April 20, 1877 in Kalat, Baluchistan (Pakistan). The *HANDBOOK* also mentions Sind (Karachi). It seems there were no further sightings of the hypocolius till Dr. Sálím Ali saw and procured a specimen from Kihim on November 14, 1930 (Ali 1931). Apart from this, there was also said to be a report of its occurrence in Madhya Pradesh. It was nearly thirty years later that a female and a male were collected in mist nets consecutively on March 22 and 23, 1960 at Kuar Bet on the southern edge of the Great Rann of Kutch (Shekar 1960). Apart from this, Dr. T.J. Roberts quotes Gen. Christon (pers. comm.) having come across a pair at Dalbadin in the Chagai (Pakistan) in 1942.

At the best of times, birds are unpredictable creatures changing their pattern of movement and distribution over a period of time. This fact is proved by the recent records

of occurrence of *Hypocolius ampelinus* on both sides of the border between India and Pakistan. Roberts (1992) refers to R. Passburg and himself having observed small parties of this species in the Hab valley (west of Karachi) between February 3 and March 6, 1984. This included a flock of 16 birds on February 17, 1984. Then Asad Ali and R. Passburg saw some numbers in 1986 and 1989 in the same location. But the most significant observation was that of Roberts himself, of 25 to 30 individuals at Zangi Nawar lake in the Chagai desert (Baluchistan) on May 1, 1985; they were going to roost in pairs, behaving excitedly and calling continuously.

S.N. Varu (SNV) accompanied by members of the local nature club was the first person to record the recent occurrence of the hypocolius in Kutch, a male in the vicinity of Chhari Dhandh on January 23, 1990 and one female the same day drinking water at the small village tank of Fulay. During the Bird Migration Study Project undertaken by the Bombay Natural History Society from January 1990 for two years, S. Asad Akhtar and J.K. Tiwari recorded the hypocolius and also captured and ringed a few individuals (details given in the Project Report). From 1992 to 1994, J.K. Tiwari made a more detailed study of the hypocolius at Fulay village under the BNHS Grasslands Ecology Project. The details of occurrences are given in Table 1.